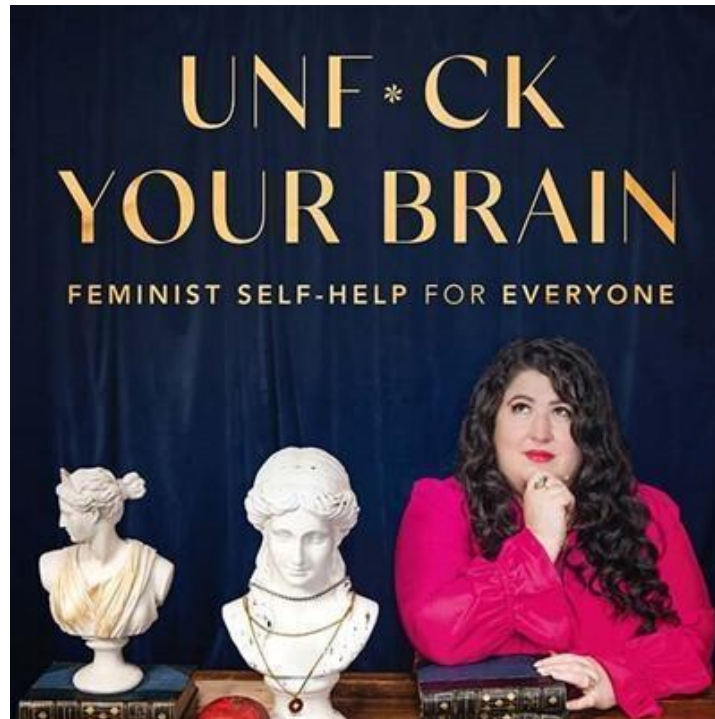


# UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

# UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations

Welcome to *Unf\*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms. One that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Hello, my chickens. As you know if you follow me on social media, or you may just have guessed from this podcast title, I recently got engaged. And that's in air quotes because, I don't know, even that phrase feels kind of weird, like I got engaged. I mean, I guess we say I got married. But I don't know, it seems funny.

Going through this process of deciding to get engaged, deciding to get married, brought up a lot of stuff for me to work through. And some of it was personal, some of it was political, obviously, those things are related. So I'm going to do two episodes where I talk about this experience and what I've noticed in terms of social programming in my brain and how I've been coaching myself on it.

And in this episode, I'm going to kind of warm us up by talking about how engagement and engagement expectations, I think, are kind of a microcosm for how we're in a society in transition and the weird ways that our brains may respond to that.

And to be quite honest, I think that even if you don't give a shit about ever getting engaged or anything like that, this episode is going to be useful, if you even press play on it, because it also has to do with expectations. Just like expectation management, where our expectations come from, and why it can be so kind of disappointing if they're not met.

So, that's what I'm talking about and what we're going to talk about today. And then in the next episode, I'm going to talk about my kind of conflicted

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## **UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations**

feelings about marriage itself as, not a metaphor, kind of an example of microcosm of how to navigate ambiguity and ambivalence around socialization and our participation in patriarchal structures.

So let's talk about engagement. And I did some research for these episodes, which was kind of fun. Let's talk about the history of the practice and how it's still shaping us today.

So historically, people came to be married in a lot of different ways. In some societies, marriage was arranged between the parents, and it was all about making social or political or economic alliances, especially among the upper classes of society. In some societies people were more free to decide on their own who to marry.

And engagement periods really varied. A couple might have a long engagement, especially among the upper classes where a large lavish wedding needs to be planned. I mean, sometimes marriages among the aristocracy were arranged when the parties were still just children or, more upsettingly, between an adult and a child who had to grow up to be old enough to get married.

So that or people might get married very quickly. In some places, like medieval England, you didn't need any kind of officiant to get married and marriages were binding just if the two parties agreed to be married, which led to difficulty proving marriages when they were later contested. And in some kinds of social conditions, like in medieval England, for engaged couples, having sex just made the marriage official.

The tradition of giving a ring at engagement is sometimes said to have originated with the ancient Egyptians, and then been adopted by the Greeks and later the Romans. Although the history is a little scant, it sort of seems like we're not totally sure about that.

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations

The idea behind putting a ring on the fourth finger of the left hand supposedly came from the Romans because of the belief that this finger contained what they call the vena amoris.

I'm not sure that that's the correct pronunciation because I don't speak Latin. I mean, nobody speaks Latin. It's a dead language, but you know what I mean, which was believed to run straight to the heart. So the idea was that the fourth finger of the left hand had a vein that went straight to the heart.

One of the explanations I've also heard for giving a valuable ring is that if the man jilted the woman, because all these traditions occurred in a society that was heteronormative and only sanctioned marriages between men and women. If the man jilted the woman, having compromised her reputation, she at least had the ring, which she could sell.

It's unclear that this explanation is true, but I guess what I like about it is that, metaphorically at least, it recognizes that marriage is kind of inherently an economic arrangement and usually was an economic arrangement. And I talk about that a little bit in the next episode.

So where did the modern idea of a proposal come from? I think our modern idea is usually that it's a man proposing to a woman, he gets down on one knee, he gives her a diamond ring. So there's different elements of this, right?

The idea of the man proposing to the woman is obviously a patriarchal element because women are socialized to believe that being chosen by a man for marriage is the biggest achievement of our lives and the validation that we are good enough.

## UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations

And women are socialized to be the objects of desire, and to believe that their value is determined by a man's eagerness to pursue and subdue them. So they have to be the passive party in the ceremony, with the man taking the active role to make the proposal to the woman.

The use of a diamond ring especially comes essentially from a De Beers advertising campaign in the early 20th century because they needed to sell some diamonds. I think that a diamond is forever is perhaps the most impactful advertising slogan ever created.

And the man going down on one knee, there's different explanations. Some people think it comes from courtly culture in medieval England. I read an article that was, I thought, fascinating and hilarious that argued that it became much more prevalent when silent films were created because it was very visually signaling a proposal. So having the man go down on one knee made it very visually clear what was happening when they couldn't have sound.

So a lot of different explanations, but this all dovetails with the way that women are socialized to believe that a man's romantic gestures are determined by how much he loves a woman, which is determined by how attractive and valuable she is.

So that's what I think is really important around engagements and engagement expectations, is this belief that an engagement should be this romantic gesture, right? Because we've evolved from marriage being something that families arranged that was mostly about economics and alliances to being this supposedly freely chosen intimacy, form of intimacy and commitment. And so we then attach all this romantic significance to it.

And so we are socialized to believe that men love women based on how attractive and valuable they are. And that a man will be romantic if he really

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations

loves you, right? And so, we are looking for big romantic gestures to convey to us that the person really loves us, and that that means that we are worthy.

This socialization, of course, around big romantic gestures, I think, is inextricably connected to the fact that we put the bar on the ground for how much we expect from men in non-big romantic gesture days, as in almost every other day of your life, right, in terms of the daily equality, of maintaining and running a home and family.

So our expectations for how men show that they love you is not that they show up as an equal partner to deal with all of the logistics and drudgery that even a wonderful life entails in terms of running a home, bearing and raising children, keeping that whole marriage and family thing running. We don't expect that. But what we want is a grand romantic gesture, which happens one to three days out of your life, right? And that's supposed to show how much we're loved and how valuable we are.

Now, in most areas of our lives, we would acknowledge that some people are just much more into elaborate projects and surprises than other people are, right? We don't make it a referendum on the relationship. Like let's think about a birthday party.

There's absolutely social pressure on parents, especially moms, to throw Pinterest birthday parties these days. And I think that women do internalize that and they think that they sort of should be able to be crafty and have enough time to put all those things together and be a perfect homemaker.

But I don't think we assume that a mom who doesn't throw an elaborate birthday party is revealing that she doesn't love her kid, and moreover, that's because the kid isn't good enough to inspire that kind of love. But that's what we think about engagements and romantic gestures, right?

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations

Moms who can't get it together or don't want to get together to throw an elaborate party think that there's something wrong with them as a mother because in a patriarchal society the common theme is the woman is always wrong. Whatever is happening, the woman is at fault.

But we don't think, well, that person didn't throw an elaborate surprise party or I didn't throw an elaborate surprise party, so it means I don't love my kid. And or if I don't love my kid, it's because my kid isn't high quality enough and deserving of this gesture.

Or just think about it in romantic couples, but swap the gender, right? If a woman doesn't throw her husband an elaborate surprise party, no one assumes it's because she doesn't love him. And women are not expected to propose to men at all.

But women are socialized to want these big romantic gestures from men, especially around their engagement. And women are socialized to equate those gestures with how much a man loves them, which they are socialized to equate with how valuable they are as women.

So what this means is that if you're someone who has or had big expectations around a proposal, it's understandable, it's socially normal. But that doesn't mean that it's helpful, especially if you, like me, are partnered with someone whose brain and personality type do not lend themselves to dramatic surprise events.

But that's what happens when we're socialized to believe that the way people act is about us, it makes everything they do a referendum on our worth and value or our thoughts about us. And I'm talking about engagements here, but I see this around birthday party celebrations or Valentine's Day and a million other areas we have expectations of in our lives.

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)



## **UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations**

But even just talking about sort of romantic gestures, I see this around sort of that same pattern of men not being expected to pull equal or more weight in the daily management and nurturing of a relationship. But instead, we are socialized to expect these big romantic gestures and then our expectations are usually disappointed.

Because other people's behavior is actually not about us or how much they love us, even though our brain tells us, "Well, if he really loved you, he would have done what your cousin's husband did on Instagram and gotten a hot air balloon filled with your favorite kind of puppies and launched it to the song that was playing on the jukebox on your first date, and had the bartender from that dive bar deliver the ring," or whatever. I'm making this up off the top of my head.

But how people act is about them and their brains. Like my partner has never made a long-term plan in his life. He has zero attention to detail. He has ADHD. He has the standard issues with short term memory and executive function that go along with that. People with ADHD also often have trouble with long-term planning and project management because of how their brain perceives time.

So my partner is amazing at living in the present, which is something that I could really stand to do more of. But he's not someone whose brain would ever think to plan some kind of long-term elaborate surprise. And, like many couples, this was not a surprise. We had spoken about getting married. I had already agreed to live together and help raise his kids, which is a much bigger commitment in my mind.

And in our case, especially because of our complicated life schedules, before he technically proposed, which we only did because he wanted to, we had already gotten a venue for the wedding. We had planned parts of a kind of group honeymoon for our family we wanted to take with us.

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)



## **UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations**

We were just waiting for the ring to make it official in the sense of letting people beyond our close circle now. I should say rings. We got each other rings, because that was important to me that we both are wearing a symbol of this commitment.

We also live together and talk about everything. So even he did organize a small proposal because, again, he wanted to. I was fine just being like, hey, let's just tell everybody we're getting married. And so he took me to a park and then we were meeting friends for dinner. But even that wouldn't have been a surprise because he kept forgetting it was supposed to be a surprise and letting me know when he heard from friends if they could come or not.

So I think our whole story is like a microcosm of where we are in the social transition. I mean, not everybody's partner has ADHD, but we have feminism. We have beliefs about gender equality. We know that statistically, marriage is better for men than for women. But we may still choose to get married. I'm going to talk about that in the next episode.

But meanwhile, we aren't generally getting engaged these days in a context where both people live separately with their parents and have gone steady for three months on short dates to the movie theater and the mini golf and the proposal is a start of an entirely new phase of life.

Often, we live together already. Sometimes we have kids together already. We're already all tied up in the day to day of domesticity. And it's not really a context in which a dramatic surprise proposal even makes a lot of sense. But because we've been socialized to see that as being what counts as romantic, right, what we even consider romantic is socialized.

It's socialization that makes us think being romantic is important. It's socialization that defines romantic. And it's socialization that tells us what

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations

meaning to put on it. And we've been socialized to see some kind of elaborate proposal as romantic, and that a man's romantic gesture indicates our value.

And so we can have this kind of split brain where we both think that it's silly, and yet still want it to happen. And, for me, I actually didn't really want a big, elaborate proposal. I mean, I know my partner very well and I know us and I feel like at my age especially, that was just not something I wanted.

But I still could see the ghost of that socialization kind of popping up in that sort of feeling like the way we got engaged felt a little anticlimactic, even though I didn't really want the climax. I didn't want the climactic version and it wasn't a feasible thing for us.

So if you're nursing hurt feelings, because you had a proposal that felt lackluster to you, you can still change your feelings about it. You don't have to hold onto those thoughts and emotions if they came from having expectations that don't match who your partner actually is, or that came from wanting them to propose in a certain way to sort of prove something to you about their love for you or your value.

And if you're heading towards a proposal or you think you might be, think about your expectations and desires on purpose, right? Write down your thoughts. I think you should ask yourself, what's the point of a proposal? Why have a proposal? What meaning are you putting on the proposal?

If you have an idea of how you want your partner to propose, why are you attached to that idea? It might be a specific idea, like I want them to do it at the place that we agreed to move in together or whatever it is. Or maybe you just have this belief that you want it to involve surprise elements, right? Or you want it to involve a paid musician hiding in the bushes or whatever it is that you have this idea around.

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## **UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations**

I also think if you are a woman who's expecting a man to propose to you, are you going to propose to him? Why or why not? Think about that. Part of the reason I think some women feel the need to project manage the proposal while pretending it wasn't them, is that they don't give themselves the freedom to do an epic proposal for their partner.

It sort of reminds me of this thing my grandmother once said to me, that she picked my grandfather because she wanted someone ambitious. And I've always thought about how, because of her time and place, she didn't really see a way to be ambitious for herself.

She was the ambitious one. I mean, my grandfather may have been ambitious, too. He was the dean of NYU Medical School, he did have an important job. But, for sure, my grandmother was ambitious and she didn't have a place to put that ambition, or enough avenues open to her to express it.

So if you have an elaborate proposal idea that you wish your partner would do for you, have you considered doing it for them? Because women are socialized to be passive and the object of desire, we have to sit around waiting. And I think our energy and enthusiasm and ideas can kind of curdle with the impatience of waiting around for someone else to make something happen.

So why are you doing that? If you want to get married, why aren't you proposing, right? If it's because of the socialization that we're taught that women who want to get married are desperate or that the man has to do the choosing or it doesn't count, do you like that reason?

And those thoughts are very deep. I mean, my partner and I decided to get married through several conversations, as opposed to one person out of

## UFYB 306: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 1 – Engagement Expectations

the blue just being like, “Hey, let’s get married,” which I feel like would be weird, especially at our age.

But anyway, even though it evolved naturally from those conversations, there was this part of my brain that was like, “Well, maybe he didn’t really want to get married. You can’t know that he really wanted to get married if you haven’t had a surprise proposal out of nowhere that he came up with himself, that was big and dramatic.” That’s the fucked up socialization in our brains.

So, however you want to approach this area of life, spend some time with your thoughts, right? Every area of deep socialization means a deep mind of interesting thinking and meaning to uncover and work with. And that, my friends, is a better mind to invest in than any diamond mind you could find.

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